

Systematic review of traditional and complementary medicine use among Indigenous cancer patients

22 May, 2018

A review of traditional and complementary medicine use among Indigenous cancer patients across four countries has found that cancer patients continue to hold traditional medicine in high regard as they seek to cure and cope with their diagnosis.

Led by Menzies School of Health Research (Menzies), the systematic review has been published in the journal *Integrative Cancer Therapies*.

Lead author, Menzies researcher Alana Gall says she was able to identify many perceived spiritual, emotional and cultural benefits associated with the use of traditional and complementary medicines in her study of patients from Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States.

“Cancer patients are increasingly using traditional and complementary medicine alongside conventional treatments, such as chemotherapy or radiation therapy,” Ms Gall said.

“Traditional and complementary medicine is used for stress relief, cleansing and strengthening the body, increasing energy, healing and recovery and improving well-being.

“It is also regarded as intrinsic to wider belief systems as a means of maintaining connections with family and community.”

Ms Gall says the estimated extent of traditional and complementary medicine usage varied from 19 per cent in Indigenous Australians to 30 per cent among Native Hawaiians and 58 per cent among Maori in New Zealand, however these estimates are believed to be conservative.

“The figures highlight the issue of communication, and the importance of effective, safe and coordinated care for Indigenous cancer patients. Our review found that patients mostly opened up to their healthcare provider when they felt safe to do so, so putting aside our own backgrounds, experiences and biases when speaking with Indigenous cancer patients, will help improve that clinical communicative relationship,” Ms Gall said.

Ms Gall’s findings are based on a literary review of 21 journal articles from 18 studies across four nations between 2000 and 2017.

“Previous research found that the use of complementary medicine has increased from about 25 per cent in the 1970s to more than 32 per cent in the 1990s and to 49 per cent post-2000,” Ms Gall said.

Ms Gall said that many health professionals had little understanding of traditional beliefs and values of Indigenous cultures, which negatively impacted communication and patient satisfaction.

“It is important that health professionals recognise this and are respectful when engaging in conversations about traditional and complementary medicine use,” Ms Gall said.

A variation of the article formed part of a presentation for which she won the 2017 Charles Darwin University Library – SAGE Publishing Scholarship for an Indigenous higher degree research student.

The paper is available [here](#).

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Media contact:

Paul Dale, senior communications officer

Phone: 0439 108 754 or (08) 8946 8658 | Email: communications@menzies.edu.au

Menzies School of Health Research

Menzies School of Health Research is one of Australia's leading medical research institutes dedicated to improving Indigenous, global and tropical health. Menzies has a history of over 30 years of scientific discovery and public health achievement. Menzies works at the frontline, joining with partners across the Asia-Pacific as well as Indigenous communities across northern and central Australia. Menzies collaborates to create new knowledge, grow local skills and find enduring solutions to problems that matter.